

Music as “food for the soul”: Sufism and Music in Senegal

There is an ever-present figure in Senegal who embodies the various temporalities which conform the chronotope of Africa. Senegalese scholar, writer and musician Felwine Sarr suggests that the African continent is shaped by the “delocalisation of its presence in a perpetual future”, that is, a vision of what it will be, and thus, of a sort of incomplete present. Sarr then invites us to rethink Africa as an Afrotopia, an “active utopia in search, within the African realism, large areas of what is possible and to seed them.” To this intellectual and artist, such task would only be possible through a spiritual revolution. Whilst there are many different forms of spiritual beliefs and practices, in the case of Senegal, there is a particular leader that would not go unnoticed, Cheikh Amadou Bamba (c. 1853-1927). In 1883, he founded Muridism or the *Muridiyya*, one of the main Sufi brotherhoods, also known as *tariqas* or *turuq*, through which Islam is practised in Senegal. This social organisation, along with *Tidjanyya* and the *Qadryya*, derive from Sufi mysticism, and emphasise both the spiritual education of the disciples, and the relationship between the cheikh, or *shaykh*, and the *Murid* (aspirants, disciples), also known as *talibés* (students). The cheikh acts as a mediator between God and the disciple, and is referred to as a *marabut*, (deriving from the Arab word *murabit*), a spiritual guide. This way of practising Islam, through the devotion and loyalty to a spiritual guide, has largely contributed to spread of Islam in Senegal. Religious families enjoy a very powerful status across the different localities in Senegal, where there are a number of spiritual guides within different neighbourhoods.



Figure 1. Cheikh Amadou Bamba painted over a wooden panel in Ngor Island, Dakar. Photo credit: Áurea Puerto (2016).

Beyond these spiritual figures of the present, there is a remarkable devotion to the founder of Muridism, Cheikh Amadou Bamba, also referred to as Serigne Touba, because he also founded the holy city of Touba in 1887. Up to today, hundreds of Murid devotees gather there to pray and sing the *zikr* (statement of faith). There is also an annual religious festivity, a pilgrimage to what is considered the Senegalese Mecca, Touba, during the *Grand Maggal*. Millions of people join, both from Senegal and the diaspora. The impact of this festivity is particularly noticeable in the everyday life of the country, with a remarkably silent metropolis, Dakar, with barely any vehicles or people in the streets, a general lack of cars because they are mostly travelling to Touba, traffic diversions to avoid such crowds all over Senegal, thousands of people cooking, getting clothes tailored for the occasion, and engaging in different forms of investments to participate in the religious festivity in different ways.

For those who do not physically engage in the pilgrimage, mainly because of family, health or economic reasons, there is a virtual

experience of the festivity, through its continuous television coverage, or the daily encounter with an obvious quieter place. Yet, Cheikh Amadou Bamba's presence goes further beyond the *Grand Maggal*. His portrait is based on a single photograph found in 1912. This iconic Sufi image can be found all over Senegal, not just on T-shirts, necklaces, postcards, posters, stickers, and further stationary, but in street art, carved on tress, painted on walls, and on *car rapides*, a kind public transport in Dakar... Its appearance serves as a form of protection, acknowledgement or celebration. It has become a very unique expression of popular culture in Senegal. If it embodies the various temporalities which conform the chronotope of Africa, and not just Senegal, it is because other than writing a large number of poems divulgating the Koran, he also led a pacific cultural struggle to the French colonial rule, through a reinterpretation of Islam based on black African culture(s). It represents a past projected within the present and to be taken into account and fought for on the way to the future. One of Cheikh Amadou Bamba's main disciples was Cheikh Ibrahima Fall (c. 1855-1930). His image is also all over Senegal. He has a large number of disciples, known as *Baay Fall*, or *Yaay Fall*, in the case of women. These Murid disciples are characterised by a loyal devotion to their spiritual guides, community service and work, and the use of Murid accessories or amulets, such as bags, necklaces, bracelets, patchwork or black and white clothes, and quite often, dreadlocks.



Figure 2. A poster of Cheikh Ibrahima Fall, and painted of one of his disciples, Seriñe Fallou Mbacké. On the right, a typical Baay Fall outfit, made out of patchwork, in the Médina, Dakar. Photo credit: Áurea Puerto (2016).

These set of values, often identified more as spiritual than as religious, has also had an overwhelming impact on music. In fact, as Senegalese musicologist Boubacar Camara notes, music has been used by religion as a means to reach the divine. It helps spread the religious message in different local languages, waking individuals up. Within the different brotherhoods there is a vast religious repertoire of a music both of Arabic-Muslim and black inspiration. Eric Charry observes the inclusion of quotations from the Koran among *gèwëls* (griots), as well as of acknowledgements and celebrations of Sufi and other Muslim leaders not just in praise songs (with strong reference to Muridism and tradition), but also, in popular songs. According to Fiona McLoughlin, “almost every Senegalese popular musician has a repertoire that includes several songs that could be characterised as Islamic.” There are also numerous religious singers whose music videos are continuously playing on television, such as Moustapha Mbaye Sope

Nabi, Wolof singer of religious inspiration who collaborated with Youssou N'Dour, one of the most internationally acclaimed Senegalese musicians, or Abdoul Aziz Diop. Papis Samba has stressed the role that festivals have played in the dissemination of religious music, making it “more audible” to the wider public. One such case is the *Festival des Musiques spirituelles*, founded in 2011, whose two first editions, in partnership with the town hall of Dakar, presented itself as open to all religions, Sufi, sacred and spiritual music. It has included acclaimed artists, such as Carlou D, Iba Gaye Massar, and Aïda Faye Bou Baay. More recently, in 2015, the internationally acclaimed Senegalese musician Youssou N'Dour founded the *Festival Salam* in Dakar, the only music festival in Senegal celebrated during the holy month of Ramadan. Youssou N'Dour had already been the patron of another religious festival hosted in 2011, named *72 Heures de la Médina: Médina en fête*, the a very popular neighbourhood in Dakar, home of a large number of artists, including Youssou N'Dour himself. *Festival Salam* is a religious festival to celebrate the Prophet Mouhamed and all artists spreading Islam through their music. It takes places over a week during Ramadan, with performances from numerous Senegalese artists, as well as musicians from further Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. It is a very popular festival in Senegal. The festival does not only invite physical participation, but also, virtual, through its full coverage in Youssou N'Dour's own television channel, *Télé Futurs Média Religion* (tfmReligion).

However, the Sufi inspiration in music and relation between Muridism and music goes beyond religious music and religious music festivals. Oumar Fall, co-owner and manager of the ndar ndar music & café, a reference in the music scene in Saint-Louis, city hosting a large number of long running music, dance and film festivals, also notes such smooth relation between music, religion and Muridism: “There is no problem with that. We see Baay Falls with their percussion who are singing to their spiritual guide, Cheikh Amadou Bamba, and now we see it increasingly more with orchestras singing and getting adherence from the audiences. In Senegal we are open in relation to many things.” Fall sees this as part of the openness in Senegal, which makes well produced music a key means of transmitting messages, including spiritual and religious ones. A large number of musicians devote titles to their spiritual guides, notably, Cheikh Amadou Bamba and his disciple, Cheikh Ibrahima Fall. These are not religious, but rather, songs mixing different kinds of styles, jazz, blues, folk, afrobeat and highlife, salsa, with acoustic guitars and a combination of modern and traditional instruments. Papis Samba, the first scholar to ever edit a monograph entirely devoted to Senegalese music, argues this is a defining feature of musicians in Senegal, such as Souleymane Faye, Viex Mac Faye, Ismaël Lô or Pape Niang – they speak of their music as afro or African, influenced by jazz, soul and other genres.



Figure 3. Oumar Fall at ndar ndar music & café. Photo credit: Maya Hautefeuille (2018).

Such musical diversity and embodiment of Muridism is arguably best represented by legendary multifaceted musician Cheikh Lô. While born in Burkina Faso in 1955, he left the country to study in Senegal to then return to Burkina Faso and play the drums with Volta Jazz. He would then be in between Burkina Faso and Senegal, back and forth, when in 1989, Cheikh Lô surprised the Senegalese audience with a spontaneous salsa performance of the song *El Guantano* by Barroso. That would be a kick off point in his prolific music career, first with the record label Jololi and then with UK-based World Circuit. He has ever since been touring both in Senegal and internationally, not just in Africa but all over the world. His inclusion in a festival programme or concert in Senegal guarantees a full audience. According to Lucy Durán, Cheikh Lô's charismatic personality and strong religious orientation have largely contributed to his special place and popularity in the Senegalese music world. He is a loyal disciple whose music and life are devoted to his marabut, Mame Massamba NDiaye, in a kind of hybrid music with influence from many different styles, such as salsa, jazz, *mbalax* (originally a fast form of drumming and dancing for Wolof celebrations), with an intimate and spiritual sound. Durán further notes some Cape Verdean *morna*, Spanish flamenco, and Zairean rumba, with specific reference to his album *Ne la Thiass*, first recorded and produced in 1996 in Dakar by Youssou N'Dour. In 2016, the *Festival Saint-Louis Jazz*, one of the longest running music festivals in Senegal, faced some organisational difficulties. This was due to a false alarm of a potential terrorist attack in Senegal, mainly because of a poor communication strategy, and largely affected the audience numbers, with certain cancellations of the headlines. However, the night in which Cheikh Lô was performing, the festive environment could be felt all over the city of Saint-Louis, not just in the main stage, but in the streets and "OFF" performances across different music venues in Saint-Louis. Everyone was talking about one of the most awaited performances of that twenty-fourth festival edition in 2016.



Figure 4. Cheikh Lô during the 24th *Festival Saint-Louis Jazz* in 2016. Photo credit: Estrella Sendra (2016).



Figures 5 & 6. Cheikh Lô featuring in the “IN” and “OFF” programme of the 24th Festival Saint-Louis Jazz in 2016.

The Murid spirit embraced in Cheikh Lô’s performances can also be sensed in the broader Senegalese music scene. The country is home to over a hundred cultural festivals, most of which have been founded in the twenty-first century, with certain exceptions, such as the still present *Biennale de l’Art Africain Contemporaine (Dak’Art)*, established in 1990, and the *Festival Saint-Louis Jazz*, whose first edition took place in 1993 and which is also celebrated today. Among them, there is a large number of music festivals. Over eighty percent of the multidisciplinary festivals are music festivals, and when festivals are multidisciplinary, they often include music in their programmes in order to broaden their audiences, and as organisers themselves state, to “popularise” their festivals. Among these, it is worth mentioning *Africa Fête*, first organised in Senegal in 2001, following its launch in France 1978, by Senegalese music producer Mamadou Konté (1948-2007). Today, the Senegalese festival is directed by Rokhaya Daba Sarr, and hosted in a different location each year to help decentralise the cultural scene in the country and promote local artists. There have also been different jazz and blues festivals, some of which have ended after a few years, such as *Festival du Sahel*, *Festival Jazz de Dakar*, *Cisko Jaaz Dakar*, *Gorée Jazz Festival*, *Dakar-Gorée Jazz Festival*, *Festival Coeur en Or* and *Festival Blues du Fleuve*, organised up to today by another emblematic name of the Senegalese music scene, Baaba Maal. There are also several hip-hop festivals, including the *FESTA 2H*, *Festival Hip Hop Awards*, *Festival des Arts Hip Hop de Kaolack*, *Festival Rapandar*, *Festival 72h de Hip Hop* in Dakar, *Festival Saint-Louis Carrefour Hip Hop* or the *Festival Njaambuor Hip Hop* in Louga. Further music festivals include the *Festival Métissons* in Saint-Louis, the *Festival À Sahel ouvert*, and various folkloric music festivals, such as the *Festival de Folklore et de Percussion* in Louga (FESFOP), *Festival Rythmes et Formes du Monde*, *Festival D’Abène*, *tival International de Ziguinchor (Zig’Fest)*, or the *Festival de vieilles pirogues*, among others. Their programmes include not just established musicians

within the Senegalese, African and world music scene, but also, young musicians who are seeking to find a place in both the national and international music world. The local endorsement is key for such place and success within the industry. Throughout the year, the continuous performances of the younger generation of artist, such as Takeifa, a band whose names derive from the Keïta family, as it is composed of siblings, Jack Keïta, main singer and guitarist; Mamma Keïta, bassist; Cheikh Tidiane Keïta, guitarist (and plastic artist); Ibrahima Keïta, drummer; and Fallou Keïta, in the percussion. The family, originally from Kaolack but established in Dakar since 2006, where they have been developing their music career, has been playing with well-known Senegalese and international musicians, such as Baaba Maal, Youssou N'Dour, Daara J Family, Femi Kuti, Alpha Blondy, Macaco and El Bicho, among others. Further examples include Marema, born in Dakar, from a Mauritanian father and Senegalese mother, who won the Jury Prize StarAfrica Sounds in 2014 for her first single *Femme d'affaires*; and Maïna, originally from Saint-Louis, and recently awarded an artistic residence in France as part of the *Visa pour la création* 2019 programme. They are regular performers in Dakar and Saint-Louis, where they establish close bonds with the local population and cultural scene. It is not rare to meet them hanging out at the *Institut Français* in Dakar, Just 4U, sitting in the audience to while listening to Cheikh Lô, at the Bazoff Restaurant in Dakar, to then be invited to sing a song along, like it happened to Marema; or having some Ethiopian coffee or local juice while listening to music or having an interview at the ndar ndar music & café, Siki Hotel, or performing at the Flamingo Restaurant, in Saint-Louis. They are close to people, and enjoy establishing friendships, networks and further forms of connections.



Figure 7. Sahad and the Nattaal Patchwork during the 7th Festival *Cœur en Or*. Photo credit: Estrella Sendra (2019).

This is how, in the spring of 2016, I met Sahad Sarr for the first time. I had already heard about him, and his brothers, also in the artistic scene. If Sahad Sarr is a musician, born in Dakar and based in between the capital and Kamyak, where he manages the first project of his association *JiwNit*; his brother, Felwine Sarr, is the aforementioned musician, writer, scholar, author of several novels and the essay-book *Afrotopia*, awarded the Grand Prix of the Literary Associations (GPLA) in 2016; and Saliou Waa Guendoum Sarr, whose artistic name is Alibéta, musician, theatre actor, and co-director of the documentary film *Life Saaraba Illegal* (2016), on irregular migration. I was actually screening a documentary film on migration which I had co-directed with a Senegalese journalist, Mariama Badji, *Témoignages... « waa suñu gaal »*. It was in Aula Cervantes in Dakar. I was there with Mariama Badji and Mamadou Khoma Gueye, a young Senegalese filmmaker and sound engineer in the documentary, for a very heated debate which followed the film. Sahad did not just ask a question, he also introduced himself

when the event ended, and told me about his work. He would be performing in the legendary music venue Just 4U, in Dakar, at some point in the summer. I remember that evening very well. I had some friends visiting and we had planned it all to go. As we were arriving, we realised something was going on. The cars were diverting, and there were very few people by the door. The students were protesting at the *Université Cheikh Anta Diop* in Dakar, and because of the proximity to the music venue, there were rumours about the potential cancellation of the concert. Sahad was standing by the door, and kept as optimistic as usual, so we chatted and waited. Passed over midnight, things had calmed down and since there were quite a few of us and more and more people arriving for the music, the concert got started – Sahad Sarr and the Nattaal Patchwork, featuring the songs of their first album, *Jiw*, recorded in 2016 and released the following year. *Jiw* is the Wolof word for seed, in line with the name of the association he manages, *JiwNit* and of his brother's understanding of the idea of an Afrotopia. Nit means person, thus reflecting the project slogan of “seeding humanity.” That is what happened that night at Just 4U, an embodiment of such mission through a mixture of jazz, folk, afro highlife, but also of great Murid inspiration.



Figure 8. Sahad and the Nattaal Patchwork during the 7th Festival Coeur en Or. Photo credit: Estrella Sendra (2019).

We have been in touch ever since. I had not seen him performing again for a while because he had been touring around Europe and the United States of America; but I was fortunate to see him again in the spring of 2019. I also remember that evening very well. I had just had the first presentation of my doctoral research in Louga, home of the *Festival International of Folklore and Percussion* (FESFOP), which I had selected as my main case study for the study of cultural festivals in Senegal. A large number of cultural actors, FESFOP members, and friends who appeared in the thesis were there in the audience. I was very touched by the overwhelmingly positive response and had it not been because I knew I would be back in a few days, I would have probably found it very hard to leave. However, I was also looking forward to attending the *Festival Coeur en Or* at the *Institut Français* in Saint-Louis, which I had not had the chance to go to yet. Sahad Sarr was performing that night, back from his international tour. A car drove my friend and I by the gate of Louga, where we took a car to Saint-Louis. By the time we arrived, Sahad and the Nattaal Patchwork was already on stage, playing his latest single, *Wall of China*, released just a few months before. What a concert! It was the headline and highlight of the

festival, and I would even say, one of the highlights of the festival season in Saint-Louis, since the *Festival Saint-Louis Jazz* was starting in the following two weeks. Sahad Sarr and his band had refined their performance, with a rich variety of registers ranging from jazz, to folk, mbalax, afrobeat, highlife, Malian blues, rock, and what Sahad Sarr himself defines as the “afro spirit.” The Murid inspiration was also very evident along the performance and his generous approach to it as a form of sharing and spreading his talent and views. He was joined by a band of excellent musicians – Yannick in the drums, Stachys on the trombone, Emmanuel and Milda on the trumpet, Joonho on the keyboard, Lydia Froncek on percussion, and François on the bass. I was then urged to interview him to further explore his work. We met the following morning, warmly welcomed by Oumar Fall, manager of the ndar ndar music & café.



Figure 9. Sahad Sarr by the ndar ndar music & café. Photo credit: Estrella Sendra (2019).

Sahad Sarr has already played over fifty international concerts abroad and over four hundred in Senegal. Yet, **how did it all start?**

S. S.: My relationship with music started at a very early age. We used to play with so many musicians, just to have fun and enjoy. It wasn't to go out and offer concerts. It was when I was at university when a producer was passing by, listened to us, knocked on the door and went: “wow!”. He asked me if I was a musician and I said: “No, I don't do concerts.” And he replied that I should, and I started to combine my studies with my musical career. That was in 2010. And we started playing many concerts and festivals in Dakar, for about two years. Before I had only played in the different festivities at school. We started little projects in Europe.

When did you release your first album, *Jiw* and where did you record it?

S. S.: In 2014, we applied to be considered for the JMC [*Journées Musicales de Carthage*] Award, a very important music award in Africa with our first EP, *Nataal*. We went to Tunisia, where they were hosted, to represent West Africa. We played and were awarded the first prize, [*Tanit d'Or*]. It is then that our

career really kicks off. The album was released in 2017. *Jiw* is the Wolof word for “seed.” We played in the Visa for Music Festival in Rabat, Morocco. We then were shortlisted for the finals of *Marché International de l'Édition Musical* in Paris, France, in 2016. We played there, and were given another award. And after playing in the Visa for Music, we started our first European tour in 2016. We did Suisse, Germany, Belgium... We also signed with the music

record label Mektoub in France, but we recorded it in a studio in Dakar. In 2017, we went to Washington, Dallas and different places in the USA.



Figure 10. Sahad Sarr over some sand artworks in Saint-Louis island. Photo credit: Estrella Sendra (2019).

What are your sources of inspiration?

S. S.: It is not the same being an artist than a musician. You can be an artist and musician, or a musician but not an artist. An artist has fun. Their inspirations come from everywhere: their life experiences, encounters... Artists are very sensitive. I left my parents' place very young, when I was 16. I was exposed to life. But even within my family, there are musicians. My brothers are artists. They have naturally influenced me. But then, I have also travelled a lot around Africa, to Mali, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso... And then, I've been living in a Sufi world for about 16 years now, with devotion for Cheikh Amadou Bamba. That's my life, other than music. We go everywhere in Senegal to work and so on. That has also inspired me a lot. I have the education received from my family, university, but also, a spiritual education. I have learned a lot from my cheikh, and my Sufi education. Then, there is also an encounter, a conversation with someone where suddenly, an idea comes to mind. Inspiration comes in many shapes.

Your album seeks to spread a message of home towards a peaceful world and calls to explore the inner self. How do you see the relation between activism, spiritual life and music in your own work?

S. S.: Within the Baay Fall symbolism, there is music. Music is the food for the soul. Today, we have to link the temporality with the spirituality. There is just one world where there are spiritual and temporal things. Our soul needs happiness and love. It needs food, just like we do. Our soul needs certain substances. Today within the Baay Fall symbolism music is always present. Everything we do as human beings has to do with music. If you go to the street, you will hear birds and so on. Music is sung by the universe. What we do is to emulate what the

universe does. Life is music, actually. Life is symphonic. Everyone does its own symphony. Through music we speak about what is going on around us. Music is a way of awakening. It is used to make the soul beautiful, happy. Music has a role. What I do is to reflect what goes on in the environment through this means. When we play, it is not really oneself who is talking. The soul is the one talking. We will be talking about environmental and social issues. In Africa, people tend to look up to the European model, which does not belong to us; so, we talk about how it is not about living in a beautiful building, but rather finding oneself, as a cultural and spiritual being. We are hybrid beings. Even if we share similarities, we have our roots somewhere. It is not that we judge Europe. Our position is, ok guys, you have your own way of doing things. We have to accept. Yet, there are other ways of doing things. Les Baay Fall have really inspired us on that respect. Cheikh Ibrahima Fall. We speak about the spiritual being. These spiritual leaders shared that the kind of Islam which arrived from the north was a sort of imperialism or colonialism. We are not Arabs. It is much more spiritual than anything else. Just like Senghor said, the civilising mission is about giving and receiving. And we can't open up if we don't know where we are.

You are also the manager of a sustainable project of spiritual training, education, renewable energy and organic farming in Kamyak village. Do you then see your music as part of that overarching project?

S. S.: When I finished my BA, I enrolled on a masters, but I left after a month to focus on my musical career. To me, however, music is just a means. It is not that I found in music my place. We use it for a mission, it is an instrument to open a door. Every human being has something to do, and what we want to do is to spread love. Music becomes a means to get to people. When you talk to people about certain things, they are scared. This does not happen when you reach them through music. We don't consider ourselves *gëwëls* (griots). It is not about giving lessons to people. Yet there are so many sick people. We see ourselves as doctors who heal through healing the soul. We try to give a sense to life, even for people who did not know even where to go. We have to destroy those walls in the world, which are not necessarily physical.



Figure 11. Sahad and the Nattaal Patchwork during the 7th Festival Coeur en Or. Photo credit: Estrella Sendra (2019).

That is what you talk about in your latest single, *Wall of China*...

S. S.: Yes, in *Wall of China* we speak about the wall of Berlin, the wall in China and all those large walls that prevent people from moving and mixing. We speak about that fear that becomes ignorance. It is only through encountering the other that we can get to the truth, because each person has their own truth, their own seed. And in order to achieve certain knowledge, we need to open up to others. There is such a big wall in Morocco called Black Mamba. All migrants have to go through it. We are all sold an image of Europe. We admire it when we are in Africa. And music has a role in the decolonisation of the mind. We do jazz, folk, afro highlife... Yet we still remain within an afro spirit. The first times I went to Europe I was shocked. I found individualist people. Where was the joy and happiness I found in Burkina Faso, Senegal and so on? People were cold... This was in France. I had met very different French people in Senegal and when I was there... In Africa, we are sold an image of a rich continent. Everything that makes happiness, however, can be found in Senegal. We have the sun... Here, one comes and finds people are happy, there is a simple form of energy.

Suddenly, a young woman interrupts, or rather, suggests, without even noticing it, such a coherent way of ending the interview. "Such a great concert, Sahad. I loved it. Thank you." To which the artist also replied with a "thank you."

S. S.: You see? We are very rich here, but we are not even aware of that. There is a sense of accomplishment and mindfulness in Senegal. When we play, we try to show and share that energy. That is how I understand the afro spirit.



Figure 11. Cheikh Amadou Bamba & Cheikh Ibrahima Fall painted over a wall in the Medina, Dakar. Photo credit: Estrella Sendra (2015)

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